

# On the Application of Traditional Chinese Characters in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

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## Abstract

Traditional Chinese characters generally refer to those replaced by simplified Chinese characters during the simplification movement. Traditional Chinese characters, with elegant patterns and rich connotations, are regarded as the orthodox characters of the Chinese nation and one of the symbols of ancient Chinese civilization. It can not only ignite students' enthusiasm but also facilitate their understanding of Chinese culture to apply traditional Chinese to Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL). In addition, traditional Chinese characters can build a bridge between learners and ancient texts during in-depth academic research. Therefore, traditional Chinese characters are certainly beneficial as an aid to Chinese teaching and are of positive significance for the promotion of Chinese as a foreign language.

## Keywords

Traditional Chinese Character; Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL); Simplified Chinese Character.

## 1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese characters, or traditional Chinese for short, generally refer to those replaced by simplified Chinese characters during the simplification movement. As the standard Chinese used by Chinese people until 1956, traditional Chinese has a history of over 3,000 years. In TCFL, however, the debate over "traditional versus simplified characters" has never stopped. Simplified characters are simple and easy to write, while traditional characters are rich in connotation and easier to understand. Two forms of Chinese characters, with different advantages, will undoubtedly coexist for a long time, which will somewhat perplex beginners. Nowadays, from my perspective, especially in the social atmosphere in China of "reading traditional Chinese while writing simplified Chinese", traditional Chinese should be taken seriously in TCFL and thoroughly implemented as an aid in the teaching of simplified Chinese. My opinions on the importance of traditional Chinese characters are as follows.

## 2. The Advantages of Traditional Chinese in TCFL

Mr. Dai Guohua once told a story in his TCFL class. He was teaching the simplified Chinese character 听 (listen). Students asked why this character has a radical (Radicals are component of Chinese characters that give hints to the reader about what the whole character means. For example, the traditional character of listen (聽) has a radical of ear.) of (mouth) while we use ears to listen. To answer the question, Mr. Dai presented the traditional version of the character 聽 and explained how this sophisticated character had been gradually simplified. Mr. Dai reckoned that 聽 was too complicated for students but it turned out that the students thought the simplified version 听 was more difficult to comprehend, which was seemingly unbelievable. But if we have a closer look at it, the radical of the simplified version has nothing to do with the meaning of the character so the students need to rely on rote learning. It is understandable that

they thought 聽 was easier to understand. For this reason, Mr. Dai conducted an experiment. He asked non-Chinese speaking students to read three groups of Chinese characters, including 30 characters with no more than nine strokes, 30 with 10-15 strokes, and 30 with no less than 16 strokes. The result showed that students' accuracy rates in reading the three groups were almost the same, with a difference smaller than 0.1%. It can be seen that simplified and traditional Chinese characters are not that different for international students without basic knowledge of Chinese to read and recognize. [1]

### **2.1. Traditional Chinese Characters are Rich in Culture**

China is an ancient civilization with a history of 5000 years. Foreign students learning Chinese are not only studying a language but more importantly, feeling the culture embedded in the language. As a writing tool, Chinese characters tend to be simplified, which is a significant law during the development of Chinese characters. However, the abundant culture embedded in Chinese characters cannot be sacrificed for the simplicity and convenience of writing, as well as the so-called "easy reading". Traditional Chinese can elaborate on the cultural origins and implications of the language and it will be a pity not to make the most of it.

The sheer teaching of characters is monotonous and separating characters from culture is not helpful for students. It is advisable to teach simplified characters while interpreting culture via traditional characters.

### **2.2. Traditional Chinese Characters are Easy to Learn and Understand**

Simplified Chinese characters, with fewer strokes, are simple and convenient to write, thus easier for foreign students to grasp. However, there exist some drawbacks behind the superficial simplicity, the biggest problem of which is that some important radicals have been abandoned or changed during the simplification, hindering the ideographic function. For example, the aforementioned simplified character 听 (listen) has a radical of 口 (mouth), which is confusing. The traditional character 愛 (love) has been simplified to 爱, where the part 心 (heart) has been omitted. The traditional character 電 consists of 电 (electricity), 雨 (rain), and 田 (farmland), referring to the flash of lighting between the rain and the farmland. And the simplified version 电 fails to explicitly convey the meaning. In fact, it is not only foreigners who find it difficult to study Chinese characters. Even Chinese students have to read a lot of literature to grasp the essence of Chinese characters.

Reading and writing are among the most difficult parts of Chinese learning for foreign students and rote learning without understanding the reasons for word building and the meanings of the characters is not an effective learning method. Memorizing without understanding does not last, let alone in-depth comprehension and correct usage. In this regard, traditional Chinese characters enjoy more advantages since they can clearly express the meanings, which can be easily grasped on the basis of understanding. However, it is worth noting that although traditional Chinese characters can facilitate understanding, they cannot replace simplified Chinese characters in teaching because traditional Chinese characters have complicated strokes and patterns, which are difficult to master. However, traditional Chinese characters can serve as a proper addition to TCFL, as a teaching aid that is not required to be widely implemented and mastered by students, for more smooth teaching of Chinese characters.

### **2.3. Rich Connotations and Abundant Patterns of Traditional Chinese Characters Boost Students' Interest**

Many foreign learners believe that traditional characters are a symbol of ancient Chinese culture and that one should start from the origins and sources to learn the fundamentals of Chinese characters. In other words, they think that traditional Chinese characters are orthodox ones though simplified characters are popularized in China and they should start from

traditional characters since the simplified ones have evolved from their traditional counterparts. Secondly, the pattern, structure, and each stroke of a traditional Chinese character have their reasons. Thirdly, the original manuscripts of ancient Chinese books are written in traditional Chinese, so it is traditional characters that can build a bridge between ancient Chinese and those who want to dig deeper into Chinese and trace the origin of the culture of Chinese characters. Last but not the least, traditional Chinese characters are widely used in overseas Chinese communities where the compatriots unconsciously promote the culture of traditional Chinese to people around them. As a result, for people in many other countries, traditional Chinese used in shops and schools is their first understanding of the Chinese language.

In a nutshell, a majority of foreign learners are emotionally and arguably far more interested in and intimate with traditional characters than simplified ones. Therefore, adding some traditional Chinese to TCFL has a positive effect on stimulating learners' enthusiasm and developing their perseverance.

### 3. Conclusion

The simplification of Chinese characters began after the founding of the country, which has made remarkable achievements in decades of reform. It is undeniable that the illiteracy elimination and Chinese character popularization gradually conducted nationwide have propelled the development of China. However, there were a few cases where the scientific and social nature of simplified characters was violated, resulting in a more chaotic situation after simplification. For example, several unrelated characters were simplified to the same character, like 后 and 後 to 后, 幹, 乾, and 干 to 干, 髮 and 發 to 发, 隻 and 只 to 只, 穀 and 谷 to 谷, 衝 and 冲 to 冲, and 颱, 臺, and 台 to 台. Such simplification led to confusion in terms of meaning and the rule of "several traditional characters have one simplified version" baffles foreign students, making it more difficult to study Chinese.

Traditional Chinese, as one of the symbols of ancient Chinese civilization, with elegant patterns and rich connotations, is regarded as the orthodox character of the Chinese nation, which is well received at home and abroad. Its beautiful structure and abundant meanings boost foreign students' interest and it can help students better understand Chinese culture and the origin of Chinese characters due to its ideographic nature. Thus, traditional Chinese characters should be incorporated into today's TCFL to a larger extent. It is not that students should master each traditional Chinese character and it is beneficial to use traditional Chinese as a teaching aid.

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